

OH 527 TyroneMeredith

BRENT LEWIS: So today is March 27th, 2024. My name is Brent Lewis. And for the Watermen's Oral History Project, I am talking to my old friend, Tyrone Meredith. Tyrone, do we have permission to record you today?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:00:014] Yes, you do.

BRENT LEWIS: So tell me, man, when...when and where were you born?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:00:20] Born in right there in Grasonville, more or less Kent Narrows 1960.

BRENT LEWIS: So what was Kent Narrows like when you were a kid?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:00:30] Kent Narrows when I was growing up, it was like... I think at one time, it was 18 packing houses. It was... People shucked oysters in the winter and they picked crabs, we'd crab picking then during the summer. They clam, caught clams year-round, and crab and...and oyster during the winter. And it was a busy place. Busy place.

BRENT LEWIS: The shanties were still there.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:01:00] Yeah. A lot of the people that worked in the packing houses lived in little shacks they called shanties and...

BRENT LEWIS: Mm-hmm. They weren't local people for the most part, were there?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:01:11] No, they stayed there year-round.

BRENT LEWIS: They did.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:01:13] They came and they lived there.

Kent Narrows at one point in time, it's probably was maybe 7, 800 people lived down in Kent Narrows that worked there. Because being at fisheries that Jean Stelmach owned, she had about 150 people in there shucking oysters and clams. So here was... And then you had I think it was you had Herman Thompson had an oyster house, packing house. He shucked oysters, shucked clams. And then you had... maybe probably was at least about 10 or 12 at that time.

BRENT LEWIS: They were all on the Grasonville side of Kent Narrows, right? There wasn't... There weren't really any packing houses on the Kent Island side.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:01:58] All of them was on the Grasonville side.

BRENT LEWIS: All of them were on the Grasonville side.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:02:00] But it was packing houses on Kent Island down Little Creek.

BRENT LEWIS: Right. Right. Down that way. Crab Alley.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:02:04] Right. Yeah. Crab Alley, Little Creek.

BRENT LEWIS: But Kent Narrows, they were concentrated on the Grasonville side.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:02:12] Yeah, all of them was on that side.

BRENT LEWIS: Now let's talk about your family a little bit. What were the name of your mom and dad? What was your mom's maiden name and all that stuff?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:02:22] My father was Captain Eldridge Meredith and he was a fishing boat captain for about 60, 70 years. He fished right on up until the day he died and got sick and went in the hospital. He was 93 years old when he... The day before he went in the hospital, he ran a fishing trip. That was his last trip. He went in the hospital and never came back out.

BRENT LEWIS: What year did he pass, Tyrone?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:02:48] He passed in 2 17.

BRENT LEWIS: And your mom. Where is she from?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:02:53] My mother came from outside of Centreville. Her name was Margaret White.

BRENT LEWIS: Was your dad originally from Kent Narrows area?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:03:03] My father great... great-great-grandfather was Benjamin Meredith and he grew... He came to Kent Island in 1865. And the property... I own a

house, a property, I own down in Newtown off of Dominion Road. It used to be his property...

BRENT LEWIS: Get out.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:03:25] ... and his name is on my deed, Benjamin Meredith.

BRENT LEWIS: So what year did he move here?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:03:29] He came here 1865. He bought that property. He bought... He bought property on Kent Island in 1865. That was my great-great-great-grandfather.

BRENT LEWIS: Newtown.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:03:41] Newtown.

BRENT LEWIS: I've been trying to figure out...

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:03:42] You know where Newtown is?

BRENT LEWIS: Oh yeah. We... I used to pick up a kid when I was a kid. We played baseball together and I had always heard was Newtown called Newtown because the ex-slaves created a new town?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:03:50] Mm-hmm.

BRENT LEWIS: So that's really like one of the new towns?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:03:54] Could've been because most of my father's family came from Newtown.

BRENT LEWIS: Oh wow.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:03:59] See, my father grew up in Chester on Kent Island.

BRENT LEWIS: Mm-hmm. That's awesome.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:04:02] All his family.

BRENT LEWIS: So 1865, that's Civil War era.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:04:06] Right after they... Right after
the Civil War.

BRENT LEWIS: So he was a free Black man.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:04:12] He was a free Black man.

BRENT LEWIS: Had he been a slave?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:04:15] No, he never was a slave.

BRENT LEWIS: Never was a slave.

M: But I wonder he must've been one of the first guys in there
because I mean...

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:04:20] Yeah, he was.

M: Maybe because if it was, [both speaking-unclear]

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:04:21] He had 14 kids.

BRENT LEWIS: Wow.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:04:25] And one of them was Richard
Meredith which was my father's grandfather. Okay? Then
my... Then Richard Meredith had a... my grandfather was
Earl Meredith.

BRENT LEWIS: Did you ever meet Earl?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:04:43] I've met Earl and Richard. Yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: Wow. Did they work on the water?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:04:47] Yeah, I used to... Yeah. My grandfather, all of them worked on the water. They came... All of them were, you know, crab during the summer, fished and oyster during the winter. All of them was watermen. I'm the fifth generation.

BRENT LEWIS: Fifth generation.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:05:02] Fifth generation.

BRENT LEWIS: You know, one of the things that we've kind of come to learn over this project is that working on the water was something that was open to all races. So you didn't have to have a lot of money or placement in society to get started in the business. Do you think maybe that's why your ancestors leaned into working on the water because it was opportunity that they might not have otherwise?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:05:26] Yeah. It was... One thing, you worked for yourself. You was your own boss. Okay? You didn't have to work for anybody else. That's why most of them liked the, you know, became watermen because they was they... you your own boss. You...

BRENT LEWIS: And then during that era, even poor white people have a hard time being their own boss.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:05:45] Yeah. Yeah. And see, growing up on Kent Island, you know how it was back then. You know, the Black and white grew up beside each other.

BRENT LEWIS: Right.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:05:54] My father... What's-her-name, Billy Harris' wife, and him and her grew up right beside each other.

BRENT LEWIS: [Sis?].

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:06:03] Sis. They live next door to each other. So...

BRENT LEWIS: Down there like where Kirwan Store is...

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:06:08] Yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: ... out of Newtown.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:06:10] Yeah. Yeah. So you know, and then they... Then all of them were watermen and so they all worked together on the water.

BRENT LEWIS: Yeah. And you were independent and equal out there on the water.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:06:23] Yeah. On the water.

BRENT LEWIS: Whereas sometimes maybe when you got dockside, that changed a little bit in those days.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:06:32] Yeah, it's possible, but I, you know, I grew up in Kent Narrows, Grasonville, and kind of Kent Island was kind a little different when you got away... if you then up around Centreville, okay? Most of the Black and white then got along fine down on Kent

Island. But when you got up to county a little farther, it was a different story.

BRENT LEWIS: Farm county versus...farm area versus working in the water, working on the water.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:06:56] [laughs] Right, versus water.

Right. Because most of them like you said was equal. They worked. They were... But all of them was independent watermen. They worked for themselves. And versus up there, most Black people you got up the county, they either worked for some white person. Like on a farm or...

BRENT LEWIS: In a store.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:07:19] Some kind of work like that. So they wasn't equal. So it was a little different. [laughs]

BRENT LEWIS: Right, right, right. Whereas down here, your ancestors, they were able to strike out a kind of an independent life for themselves.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:07:30] Being independent, it worked for themselves in the 1800s.

BRENT LEWIS: Where did they come from? I mean if they go that far back here, where were they...

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:07:39] I think my...Benjamin Meredith which was my great-great-great-grandfather, he came out of Virginia. And it's a little town down there, I can't

think of the name of it right now, but it's a whole bunch of Merediths down there.

BRENT LEWIS: Oh, no kidding.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:07:43] Yeah. Yeah. A guy goes on a boat fishing with me. His name is... What is his name? Anyway, he's a Meredith. He's claimed he's our cousin [laughs] and he said that...

BRENT LEWIS: Trying to get a cheaper rate. [laughs]

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:08:10] But he looks something like my father.

BRENT LEWIS: [coughs] No kidding. Well, you look more like your dad the older you get.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:08:14] Mm, yeah. People tell me that.

BRENT LEWIS: So I'm going to ask you sometimes questions that I might know the answer to.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:08:21] Okay.

BRENT LEWIS: Do you have brothers and sisters?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:08:23] I got three sisters and one brother.

BRENT LEWIS: Do... Are you the only one that works on the water?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:08:29] I'm the only one that works on the water. And I have a grandson that's 10 years old named

[Bryson?]. You've probably seen him in a documentary. And Bryson once told me, "Poppop," he wants to be a captain.

BRENT LEWIS: Oh, that's awesome.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:08:42] So I'm going to teach him everything I know.

BRENT LEWIS: Because that's something that we found out, too, over this process is not a lot of kids follow their dads into the business anymore.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:08:55] Yeah. No, it's...

BRENT LEWIS: But you did.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:08:59] But back then, you know, it's kind of... the water business is kind of up and down. And it's not steady. But you can still make a living, but you got to, you know, you, it's... you got to be dedicated doing it. You got to work days. Most young people I find like now, you know, getting up 4:30 in the morning every morning, four o'clock in the morning working seven days a week. Holidays, weekends is where you make your money so you got to work every weekend, every holiday. And so most young people don't want to get up period that time of morning so...

BRENT LEWIS: Right. But you guys were driven to by money in your pocket. Kids don't seem to care as much about that as you did growing up.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:09:43] They don't, they don't. No. And like I was... I tell some people, my father, every morning, we were about 10, 12 years old. It started going out as a mate on his boat at 6 years old. He'd call us every morning at four o'clock in the morning. "Boy, you ain't up yet?" I tell people I still hear his voice in my head sometimes in the morning.

BRENT LEWIS: Wow. So you started working that young. What was your childhood like, though? Was it...

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:10:11] Well, we... He'd finish... We one night on the boat as mates during the summer when school was out. And we went out every day because we made our own money. We got paid for being a mate, we caught fish, we sold the fish, and made more money. So we had money. We made money all summer long, so we went back to school. We had a, you know, a little... a nice little savings.

BRENT LEWIS: Even at a young age?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:10:39] Yeah, at a young age.

BRENT LEWIS: Was your dad already running fishing parties?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:10:46] Yeah. It was... He started one of the first ones ever started here. Yeah. It started... I think he in 1955. Somewhere back then.

BRENT LEWIS: So before that, what kind of fisheries was he working? Was he oyster or crab?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:10:58] He oyster, clam, crab, he did it all.

BRENT LEWIS: And did you grow up also doing it all?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:10:06] Yeah, I started crabbing my own boat by 12 years old. Me and my brother, we was catching... I tell people this story, they don't believe it. One day, we caught 55 bushel of crabs. He's dipping, I'm dipping, and they steady coming up on the line. We had about 25 bushel of. .. 25 bushel number ones, I think we had 25 bushel of females, and we had like 10 bushel of twos and was getting 15 dollars a bushel for number ones and 3 dollars a bushel for females.

BRENT LEWIS: Wow, you were kids.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:11:45] We was... I was 12 years old. We didn't... We had to get somebody with a truck to come pick our crabs up to take it... We sold to George Hill. So we didn't have... Neither one had a driver's license.

BRENT LEWIS: That's amazing. Where did you keep your boat?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:12:01] Right... We lived where... We grew up in Kent Narrows. We had a pier, our own pier, where we kept the boats at.

BRENT LEWIS: I want to talk about your dad a lot but you mentioned George Hill. He was a trailblazer in a lot of ways here locally. What was he like? He's a guy that stands out in local lore. What are your memories of George Hill?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:12:21] Well, he bought more crabs... He was the biggest crab buyer on the East Coast at that time. He bought crabs from everybody. White, Black, everybody. He bought more crabs than anybody. I think anybody on... Was the biggest crab buyer on the East Coast at that time.

BRENT LEWIS: So we're talking the '60s and '70s.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:12:41] Yeah, '60s and '70s.

BRENT LEWIS: And he was located here on Kent Island.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:12:44] Yeah, Dominion Road. George Hill and Son.

BRENT LEWIS: Is it George Hill and Sons still in business?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:12:50] No, he died in... I think he got sick and he kind of sold the business because one of his sons got killed in an accident. So he... And the other one went in the military, so I don't think he had anybody to run the business with him.

BRENT LEWIS: Take the business on. So let's talk about your dad a little bit. You said that he started running fishing

parties... one of the first if not the very first. How did that start?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:13:18] Well, he tells a story that my grandfather had a night club which was called The Weeping Willow Inn down in Kent Narrows. So he said some people stopped in The Weeping Willow Inn and they was asking about fishing. Could they find a boat to... somebody to take them out fishing. My father said, yeah, he has a boat, he could take them fishing. So he started fishing and from them on, he was running fishing parties for 60-some years.

BRENT LEWIS: Where was The Weeping Willow Inn?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:13:52] The Weeping Willow Inn was if the... you know where the Hilton Hotel in Kent Narrows? Weeping Willow Inn, you come up the street right across the street.

BRENT LEWIS: About the [both speaking-unclear]

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:13:03] It was right beside the house that I grew up in. Weeping Willow Inn. I got... My nephew has... He went in the archives so I'm going to see if I can get some pi... He got pictures of The Weeping Willow Inn.

BRENT LEWIS: Yeah, man, absolutely.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:14:15] Okay, when it was open. So I'm going to see if I can get you a picture.

BRENT LEWIS: Yeah, we'd love that. We most definitely would.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:14:20] So all the big names people like James Brown, Fats Domino, and all of them used to play there.

BRENT LEWIS: Really?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:14:30] Yeah. Right...

BRENT LEWIS: So it was on the Black entertainment circuit.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:14:35] The Black entertainment circuit. Yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: Which of course means...

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:14:37] Little Richard, all everybody played there.

BRENT LEWIS: It was segregated at that... You know, that brings to mind remember [Toto Motel?]?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:14:43] Yeah, Toto Motel.

BRENT LEWIS: She was famous as a singer...

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:14:48] She was a singer. She was a singer.

BRENT LEWIS: ... back. She was a singer for like Cab Calloway or some of those. People don't realize that connection sometimes that we had to those entertainers.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:14:59] Yeah. And that place, I think it held like 300-some people. It was a pretty good size place.

BRENT LEWIS: Wow. Big building.

M: My mom was... Actually, my grandfather, John [unclear], talked about it was a Black guy down in the Narrows whose dad was a famous, famous musician like that.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:15:15] Yeah. Lloyd Price.

M: That's it. Yeah.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:15:18] Yeah. That was my uncle. He married my father's sister, Lloyd Price.

M: That's awesome.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:15:22] You've seen "Stagger Lee", "Personality". Yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: He had a lot of big hits.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:15:29] Yeah.

M: [Tom Sombo?] would be my uncle. He said three or four of his songs were his favorite songs growing up.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:15:33] That's my uncle.

BRENT LEWIS: Did you know Lloyd?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:15:35] Yeah. Yeah. He just died about five years ago.

BRENT LEWIS: That's amazing. No kidding. So would they... When these entertainers would come, would they stick around sometimes and go fishing? Like would they go out or they were just passing through?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:15:50] Just kind of passing through.

And they stopped and that was one of the... Like they had like what they called a chilling circuit where they went through and they... There was a part, my grandfather's club was a part of.

BRENT LEWIS: That's awesome, man. Kent Narrows when we come along in the '60s, you know, you mentioned that there were still a lot of packing houses down there. There weren't many restaurants or bars, you know. Fisherman's Inn and Carnabucci's.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:16:23] Yeah, Carnabucci had a Tastee Freez.

BRENT LEWIS: Right there where...

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:16:28] They had the best clams... fried clams in the world.

BRENT LEWIS: Isn't that funny, man?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:16:31] Yes, sir.

BRENT LEWIS: And we kind of came along in the era where... like before us, people really didn't eat a lot of clams around here. They were mainly bait. And so when we came along, there was a real push for clams. And I think Carnabucci was part of that.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:16:46] He... Because Carnabucci was
from up in New England so he kind of brought... You know,
the clams actually was transplanted from New England.

BRENT LEWIS: Soft-shell.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:16:58] The soft-shell clams in the bay.
That's how they got here.

BRENT LEWIS: No kidding.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:17:02] Yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: When do you think they did that?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:17:05] It had to be way probably in the
early '40s or '50s. Early '50s.

BRENT LEWIS: Has that always been a kind of thing where New
England kind of overfishes their industry and then end up
in the Bay area? Like that seems to be a thing that we
extend their market a little bit.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:17:28] Could be.

BRENT LEWIS: So your dad... When he started taking fishing
party boats, once he saw that was a viable occupation, did
he jump in pretty quickly?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:17:42] He did. He told me... he said,
"I used to crab, I used to clam." And said when he started
fishing, he made more money fishing than he did the rest of
the stuff and that totally all he did. After he started
fishing, he never did anything else. Say he would just

carry fishing parties that was the main thing that he did.
He didn't do anything else.

BRENT LEWIS: Before he passed away, he was named Admiral of
the Chesapeake?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:18:13] He was the 105th Admiral of the
Chesapeake. He was awarded... governor Larry Hogan awarded
him the 105th Admiral of Chesapeake Bay.

BRENT LEWIS: That's quite a recognition. He was proud of
that, I bet.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:18:30] He was.

BRENT LEWIS: And that was a few years before he passed away?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:18:36] That was a year before he passed
away.

BRENT LEWIS: That's awesome that he got that opportunity to do
that. So let's talk a little bit about that business. You
guys run head boats.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:18:47] Head boats, yes.

BRENT LEWIS: Tell us what a head boat is.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:18:49] A head boat you charge by the
head. The difference in a charter boat and head boat, a
charter usually charge one set price and most charter boats
only carry like six people. My boat approved for like 49
so I carry... And we charge per person.

BRENT LEWIS: Tell me about your boat.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:19:11] Boat's called *The Island Queen II* and it's like 55 feet, one of the largest boats in Kent Narrows. And 55 by about 17, it's wooden made out of mahogany. It's US Coast Guard-approved for 49 people and powered by twin 671 Detroit's.

BRENT LEWIS: How many boats have you owned?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:19:38] This would be my tenth boat. So I also own another boat, a smaller, called [*Ms. H.B. Good?*]. It's 40-foot and it's approved for like 20 and...

BRENT LEWIS: Do you run both those boats?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:19:54] I have another captain that runs it for me. It's more Black captains in the Kent... because that's how they started in Kent Narrows. So it's... I've been from here to Maine to Miami to Florida and it's more Black watermen used to work right out of Kent Narrows than anywhere on the East Coast. And most of them... You know, that we started like my father started the business at one time. It was like 40 Black captains running fishing trips out of Kent Narrows at one time. So now, we down to about maybe 10 left.

BRENT LEWIS: That's a real economic boon to the area I would think, too. A lot of people... I mean if you hold 50-plus on your... 40-plus on your boat...

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:20:44] It is.

BRENT LEWIS: And there are 10 other boats running...

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:20:46] Mm-hmm. Yeah, because a lot of the people stop, they got to buy ice, they buy something to drink, they buy something to eat, they got to buy bait. Then usually they come in, they go to one of the restaurants and they eat before they go back.

BRENT LEWIS: Do people need reservations to come on the boat?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:21:07] They do. They have to reserve.

BRENT LEWIS: How do they do that? Like online or call you on the phone?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:21:11] Mostly I do mine over the phone.

BRENT LEWIS: So it's very difficult for someone just to show up that... show up down the slips and...

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:21:19] You can show up and it usually, like when you run the head boat and especially if we taking quite a few people, we usually still have room.

BRENT LEWIS: Oh, right.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:21:30] Unless I do charter for big groups. Like I take a lot of church groups where they bring a bus with 40 people at a time. They... and they take the whole boat. So that's like a private charter.

BRENT LEWIS: What do you fish for?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:21:43] Mostly do bottom fishing, perch, white perch, spot, croaker, and catfish.

BRENT LEWIS: And what... How... What's the season? When do you work?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:21:55] I usually start April the 1st and I go until the middle of December.

BRENT LEWIS: You the first to start?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:22:04] The first to start and last to finish. [laughter]

BRENT LEWIS: You've already been this year.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:22:08] I already been out two weeks ago.

BRENT LEWIS: Took a whole crew... Took a whole...

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:22:12] Had about 15 customers.

BRENT LEWIS: Wow. And how did it go?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:22:17] The water is still kind of a little cold. It's got to warm up. We caught a few catfish, a few white perch.

BRENT LEWIS: Where do you typically take them?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:22:26] Right now, the Upper Chester River because the perch are spawning so they coming out of cricks working their way down the river, Chester River.

BRENT LEWIS: Now your dad pretty much stopped doing all fisheries when he started running the head boats. Did you continue to oyster and crab as a young man?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:22:45] I still do. I still do.

BRENT LEWIS: You still do.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:22:47] I don't crab anymore. But I still oyster during the winter. Just something to do, you know, to keep going.

BRENT LEWIS: You got to do something when you're up at 4:00 a.m.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:22:58] Oh yeah. [laughs]

BRENT LEWIS: Hand-tonging?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:23:00] I still hand-tong.

BRENT LEWIS: Tell our listeners what that is. What hand-tonging for oysters, what that job is.

TYRONE MEREDITH: Hand-tonging, you have two... a pair long shafts, wooden shafts, with ricks on the end of them. And you kind of rick the oysters up from the bottom. Then you have to pull them up. You used to pull them up by hand, but now they have hydraulic pullers to help you pull them up. Because you're talking to these tongs, they weigh about 100 pounds. And with the oysters, you're talking they weigh maybe 150, 200 pounds coming out the water. So you dump them on a culling board. You have a guy inside the boat that sorts them out from the shells and the big oysters. Then they got to be three inches, the rest of them goes back over. And he throws them in a basket until you catch your limit what is now 12 bushel per man.

BRENT LEWIS: That's changed, right?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:24:05] Yeah. It used to be 50 at one time, and when I first started, it was 75 bushel.

BRENT LEWIS: Wow.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:24:12] But you could catch 75 bushel quicker back then you can catch 12 now.

BRENT LEWIS: Did you ever get into diving or any of that?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:24:21] No, I never dived for oysters.

BRENT LEWIS: So you've always pretty much been hand-tong.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:24:24] Hand-tonger.

BRENT LEWIS: Where's that equipment come from? I mean, there aren't as many people now who have the skills to make hand-tongs.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:24:32] You still got a few people around that still make the tongs for the watermen. A lot of them learn how to do it their self. You know, the watermen got to... sometime got to invent stuff to help them out or they invent the stuff to make their job easier.

BRENT LEWIS: Right. Which they have historically done, right? I mean, for clam rigs.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:24:54] Hey, hey. Yeah. That's right.

BRENT LEWIS: Even crab... even trotlining's changed.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:25:01] Trotlining changed.

BRENT LEWIS: When you... With that equipment, that stuff that changes, it seems to me that watermen have to kind of be jack of all trades. You kind of got to be a carpenter...

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:25:18] You got to be a carpenter, a welder, you got to be a mechanic. You got to do some of the woodwork so you got to... you work on your boat. If not, it... every time something happens, you got to hire somebody, it cost you a lot of money.

BRENT LEWIS: Right. So you have to learn how to...

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:25:33] You got to learn how to fix your own equipment.

BRENT LEWIS: Was your dad a good teacher of that kind of stuff?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:25:41] He was. He was. He could do some of his... He did a lot of his own work on the motors and some work on the boat. You had to learn how to do it because you... Out there in the middle of the water, something breaks down, it's no gas station. You got to learn how to fix your own stuff.

BRENT LEWIS: Right. And rely on the other watermen boats around you, right?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:26:06] Right, that's right.

BRENT LEWIS: That creates a camaraderie, too, that crosses racial lines, I'm sure.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:26:14] Well, when like you said, when you on the water, everybody's a watermen. Doesn't make no color. What color you are, you a waterman. And if something happens, they are too happy to help the other fellow watermen.

BRENT LEWIS: Have you ever been in an emergency situation and needed help? Or have you ever helped another waterman?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:26:35] Oh, yeah. Yeah, I've been... I've done had my breakdowns, had to get towed back in by other watermen. And I towed a lot of other watermen back in that broke down.

BRENT LEWIS: Because without each other, you guys are kind of stuck, right?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:26:49] That's right. Unless you call a towing service.

BRENT LEWIS: Have you ever had anything with your customers happen, medical- or health-related or accident-related? Any-thing... Any kind of emergencies with your crew? With your customer?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:27:07] The only thing I can think of, I had some people that had seizures on the boat. And you got to be... When you get your captain's license, you have to take CPR and first aid to get certified in CPR and first aid so you know what to do if something comes up like that.

BRENT LEWIS: Do you need a special kind of license to run that boat?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:27:30] Yeah, I have a captain's license and from the US Coast Guard.

BRENT LEWIS: How do you achieve that?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:27:38] Well, you... classes you can take. You have to take a class now and you have to pass a class what they call... One part of it is rules of the road. Like on rules of the road on the land, rules of the road on the water. Then you got firefighting, you got the weather, you got to know all the clouds. You got to know all the different types of knots you tie, all the parts of your boat. You got to know where to pass a sailboat, on which side to pass boats. You got to know all your lights on all the different boats. For example, if you see a boat, a tug boat, towing a barge at night, you got to recognize what that vessel is. So it's a very intense class.

BRENT LEWIS: So even though you had that experience all your life, you still had to take the class and pass the test or were you kind of grandfathered in?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:28:35] At that time, when I got my license, you didn't have to take a class. You went up to the custom house after you study on your own and took the

test at a custom house in Baltimore to get your license.

And I think at that time, it was only... rules of the road was like 25 questions and maybe what they called deck general was 70 questions. But now, rules of the road, they made it twice as many questions and a lot more information.

BRENT LEWIS: And so that certainly changed from [both speaking-unclear]

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:29:11] But you do have to take a class because the Coast Guard don't give the tests anymore. They issue your license after you take the class and you pass the test, the class give you a certificate that you pass. So you have to get a physical and all your paperwork done. You got to have 360 days of actual working on a boat under a licensed captain. So you have to put all your time in that you served under a license captain plus a physical, your certifications, and then you got to submit all that with your certificate from your class to the Coast Guard. Then they got to issue your license. After you pass a background check by the FBI and everything else to pass.

BRENT LEWIS: So there's a lot of oversight on you guys.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:30:10] Oh yes. Yes. You just can't walk in the door and get a captain's license.

BRENT LEWIS: Say you're... you can't call yourself a captain.
[laughs]

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:30:18] No, sir.

BRENT LEWIS: So it's gotten... sounds like it's gotten harder and more strict over the years.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:30:24] It is. Because one thing, you responsible for people lives. And you the captain, you the master of that vessel. And anything happens, it comes back to you.

BRENT LEWIS: Like just what we've seen in the last couple days up in Baltimore at Sparrows Point.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:30:41] The two pilots drop... running the boat into the bridge.

BRENT LEWIS: Yeah.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:30:49] They said what happened, they dropped... they lost power and it dropped the anchor. And that turn made the ship turn, that's what... And then they ran into that piling.

BRENT LEWIS: I imagine out there on the water, you see the potential for those kind of catastrophes. Just visually, you can see the possibility of that kind of stuff happening, right? And you've probably seen people do stupid stuff.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:31:19] Oh yes. That's why I think they have... Now, they want everybody to take a... Just not that you carrying people for only need a captain's license,

you be carrying people and charging them. Now, if you have a pleasure boat, they want everybody to take a boat or safety class before... actually, before they really take the boat out.

BRENT LEWIS: Has that made your job harder that there are so many recreational...

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:31:47] Not harder, but you got to keep your eyes open.

BRENT LEWIS: Right, because not everybody's as competent as they should be, I would think.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:31:53] That's right.

BRENT LEWIS: Remember when we were growing up and Hargie's used to rent those little... Was it Hargie's used to rent those little skips?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:32:01] Those little rowboats. Those little rowboats.

BRENT LEWIS: Those little skips. You'd see those little boats everywhere. Sometimes, they'd have 8 or 10 people.
[laughs]

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:32:07] Yeah, then a lot of time, he had to go and get them, bring them back in because they always broke down.

BRENT LEWIS: [laughs] Right.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:32:13] So he had to go back and tow the people back in. What they'd do is get lost and they couldn't get back in.

BRENT LEWIS: Because Eastern Bay, Chester River can be dangerous places if you don't know what you're doing.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:32:27] Especially if the weather come... bad weather.

BRENT LEWIS: And Kent Narrows, too, right?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:32:30] The wind comes up, it can be a bad, dangerous place.

BRENT LEWIS: When diving came along, you didn't get into that. Was that a conscious decision not to?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:32:42] I never dove myself for oysters but I used to have a diver.

BRENT LEWIS: You did.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:32:47] I did have a diver.

BRENT LEWIS: How long did you do that?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:32:50] Maybe four or five years.

BRENT LEWIS: Mm-hmm. Remember when Keith Nash died?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:32:56] Yes, I did.

BRENT LEWIS: A drowning, right?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:32:58] Mm-hmm.

BRENT LEWIS: And that seemed to turn some people off from it.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:33:01] Yeah, but see, that's comes back to your captain. Because the weather was so bad, he should've never went out in the first place.

BRENT LEWIS: Right. And we both know the circumstances of that and the dangers that you take on when you, you know, maybe get a little too...

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:33:21] You got to have common sense. [chuckles] The weather, you got to look at the weather. The weather is too bad to go out, you shouldn't go.

BRENT LEWIS: [00:33:30] You make those decisions.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:33:31] You got to make that call.

BRENT LEWIS: [00:33:33] For your business you make that decision.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:33:34] That's right. You don't want to put anybody in danger.

BRENT LEWIS: Because again, you're responsible for their safety.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:33:40] The captain of the boat is responsible.

BRENT LEWIS: Do you have people that come back time after time? Like do you have [unclear]?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:33:45] I got one lady named Miss Betty. I've been fishing for 44 years, and she's been going with me for 44 years. I'm taking a lot of people grandkids

right now that started fishing with me and that father brought them when they were like 8 or 10 years. The guy told me say, "Captain Tyrone, I'm bringing my son starting now, start him at 10 years old because my father brought me on your boat when I was 10." So this is his, you know, grandkids now.

BRENT LEWIS: That's brilliant.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:34:19] So I've been there, been doing it for a while. [laughs]

BRENT LEWIS: So you say your grandson is interested in following in your footsteps.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:34:25] He is.

BRENT LEWIS: What's his name?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:34:27] Bryson.

BRENT LEWIS: Bryson. None of your kids, though.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:34:30] I have one... I just have one daughter.

BRENT LEWIS: One daughter. And so Bryson looks up at grandpa...

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:34:37] Oh yeah. He loves coming out here on a boat during the summer.

BRENT LEWIS: That's great, man, because we don't hear that a lot. You know, in these interviews, we often hear that the younger people are not interested.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:34:47] He loves fishing. Say, "Poppop, I want to be a captain one day." I say, "Bryson, I'll teach you everything I know."

BRENT LEWIS: That's beautiful, man. And keep that generational connection going. Because obviously, you feel connected to your great-greats and all that, if nothing else, through the seafood industry.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:34:10] Fifth generation.

BRENT LEWIS: Proud of that?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:35:13] Yes.

BRENT LEWIS: You should be, man. Let's talk a little bit about equipment and techniques. How have they changed over the years, what you do?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:35:25] Well, we used to... If one thing changed, it's... We... The watermen... I'd say is inventors because they come up with things to make their job easier. Just like we used to throw the anchor overboard, had to have somebody pull it in. Then we got a hydraulic anchor pull. So we'd just step on a button and it winds the anchor in which makes that easier. And with the oystering, I was telling you about the tong-pullers. You know, before, you had to pull them by hand. You talking about 100, 150 pounds you pulling out the water all day a pair of hand tongs with the oysters in it. But now,

you got hydraulics, you got a line hook to the tongs, you step on a button, and it pulls it up for you. So, you got older guys that still 65, 70 years old that still hand-tonging.

BRENT LEWIS: Who might've been opted out...

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:36:22] Oh, they would've been.

BRENT LEWIS: They wouldn't have been able because that's hard work.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:36:25] Because I'm 62 and I couldn't pull the tongs by hand no more.

BRENT LEWIS: Right.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:36:30] [laughs] I've been done.

BRENT LEWIS: What's the typical tong length that you guys work?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:36:36] Most... Between... Average about 16 feet long to about 18 feet usually.

BRENT LEWIS: That's a lot of tong.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:36:43] That's a lot of tong.

BRENT LEWIS: [laughs]

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:36:46] Especially when you fill the heads up with... The metal ricks on the end called heads. You fill them up with oysters, the shells, and the mud, that's heavy.

BRENT LEWIS: Yeah. And so even though you have all those advantages mechanically and advancements, you still kind of have to know how to do it manually, right? Like if that button doesn't work...

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:37:07] Well, oh, you still got to... you got to pull them in.

BRENT LEWIS: [laughter] They got to come up one way or another.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:37:13] They got to come in.

BRENT LEWIS: Do you carry out another tonger with you or just a culler? How does that work?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:37:21] Yeah, I carry a culler.

BRENT LEWIS: A culler.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:37:24] A guy that throws them in the baskets, yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: And do you guys catch your limit?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:37:30] Usually, this year, the oysters came back. Last couple years, they've been doing... everybody been doing very well. The oysters came back, made a comeback.

BRENT LEWIS: What do you think... Why... What's made them come back?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:37:43] Well, my thing is they put it...

They put a lot of seed over and shells in the water and then, Mother Nature brought them back.

BRENT LEWIS: Mm-hmm. Is it a cycle? Do you think it's a natural cycle?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:37:57] It's a cycle. Oysters live and die, been doing that for centuries.

BRENT LEWIS: Now before we started taping, you mentioned that you had done some like kind of barge work for Poplar Island, that type of thing. What other money-making opportunities have you taken advantage of?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:38:17] It's... I was a crew boat captain for a dredge company that... And they helped rebuild Poplar Island, and I took the guys that worked over on the island. They helped rebuild it by dumping sand and make the island bigger. And I ran a crew boat at night. Every night, we'd leave at four o'clock and come back at four o'clock in the morning. I think I worked on the Poplar Island project for like two years and then I did a... When the ship was ran aground out here in Chesapeake Bay and with all the containers on, I worked for that company, helped to dredge the ship out. I took the people that worked on the dredge back and forth for 31 days while they was digging the ship that ran aground.

BRENT LEWIS: Were you there when it came out?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:39:13] I was.

BRENT LEWIS: [laughs] I bet that was something to see.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:39:17] That... I told them in the first place to take some of the containers off, but they kept digging and digging. At the end of 30 days, they took containers off and it came off.

BRENT LEWIS: And then... [claps] Have you ever done... Have you ever worked anywhere other than on the water?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:39:31] Yeah, I start... I used to be an insurance agent for five years for MetLife. When I first... I graduated from Towson State so I had my own office and for five years. And an insurance agent for MetLife and it drove me crazy, so I went back to the boat.

BRENT LEWIS: That office gig wasn't for you.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:39:55] Sitting inside and I had to go back to the water.

BRENT LEWIS: And at the beck and call of others whereas again, you're independent and out on the water.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:40:07] That's right. You work for yourself and if you don't want to go, you don't have to go.

BRENT LEWIS: What did you study at Towson?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:40:15] Business.

BRENT LEWIS: Hmm. Do you think that helps you in your current gig?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:40:20] It helps you... yes, it does.
 Managing your money.

BRENT LEWIS: Uh-huh. Are you the first in your family to have gone to college?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:40:30] No, I had... my older sister went. She went to college and had maybe four of us out of six went.

BRENT LEWIS: Oh, so the kids.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:40:41] Yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: But certainly not your ancestors, your dad and them, the...

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:40:45] No, no, he never went.

BRENT LEWIS: Did he graduate high school?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:40:49] He graduated high school. Mm-hmm.

BRENT LEWIS: He graduated high school. Which is kind of an exception in that day and age anyway. A lot of...

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:40:56] Yeah, a lot of...

BRENT LEWIS: ... a lot of boys in particular quit school.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:40:59] Yeah, they quit school went right on out and worked on the water.

BRENT LEWIS: Yeah. In like seventh grade. A lot of them didn't make it past seventh grade. So that's pretty exemplary that your dad was able to finish school.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:41:12] Mm-hmm.

BRENT LEWIS: If he grew up down in Chester, were they living in Kent Narrows by the time you came along?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:41:23] Yes. Yeah. He had a house which is still there what I still own the house now. It a white house with a brick front and a white fence around it. It...

BRENT LEWIS: Right on Route 18?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:41:35] Right directly from... across from the Hilton Hotel.

BRENT LEWIS: Yeah. So next to The Jetty parking lot, that parking lot that...

M: The auxiliary park.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:41:43] Yeah, the auxiliary park. Yeah.

M: Wasn't there another house right next to it not too long ago? Like maybe five years ago still standing?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:41:50] And it's still a built... We owned a restaurant there for 30 years.

M: [both speaking-unclear]

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:41:55] My family had a seafood restaurant there for 30 years, and...

M: What was it called?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:41:59] Meredith's Seafood.

BRENT LEWIS: Now was it open like a restaurant or was it primarily to service the clients that you had on your boat?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:42:07] No, it was open every day, full-service restaurant seven days a week. And I think it seated about 80, 90 people.

BRENT LEWIS: Wow. Did your mom kind of run that?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:42:20] My mom... it was my mom's business. She started it.

BRENT LEWIS: Did she... Was she encouraging of you being out on the water?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:42:27] She never... She was like, you know, whatever we wanted to do, that was up to us.

BRENT LEWIS: Right. She was a pretty easygoing person. Did you guys and you in particular have any superstitions about the water or your boats? Like are you one of those guys like no bananas and...

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:42:49] No. No, no.

BRENT LEWIS: ... you know, nothing like that. Have you ever seen anything strange or unexplainable out on the water?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:42:59] We got hit by a storm in Chester River and I think a twister touched down about 90-some-mile-an-hour wind. And a couple boats, the canopies got

blowed off and the boat almost turned over and it rained so hard you couldn't see two feet in front of you.

BRENT LEWIS: Did you have people on the boat?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:43:22] We had a boatload of them.

BRENT LEWIS: Scary. [laughs]

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:43:25] Yeah. But then it goes back to being an experienced captain. When the storm comes up, you always head your boat in towards the wind. Until... and we just head it into the wind until it was... It lasted about maybe 10, 15 minutes but it felt like it'd last for hours.

BRENT LEWIS: I bet those passengers, some of them were pretty scared. Did you come out of that unscathed? Did the boat...

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:43:52] Yeah. We didn't suffer any damage.

BRENT LEWIS: But you saw other captains...

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:43:46] Seen other smaller boats did.

BRENT LEWIS: Have you ever dredged up anything or pulled up any artifacts? Of, you know, I know that when people find Indian artifacts or old-time bottles that... Have you ever found anything worth mentioning in Kent Narrows?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:44:15] No, I can't remember finding anything.

BRENT LEWIS: How does the community interact with you guys?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:44:24] I think the... A lot of the people that grew up here loved having the watermen around. You know, that's all... where all your seafood, crabs, and everything. But some of the ones that moved here, you know, the crabbers get up early in the morning. You know, three, four o'clock in the morning crabbing and they think it's a nuisance to them. The ones that come here buying...

BRENT LEWIS: Buy waterfront property.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:44:55] ... waterfront property where the houses on the waterfront. They think the waterman's a nuisance, but they forget that's where the crabs and the seafood come from. The waterman catches it. So without them, it'd be no seafood.

BRENT LEWIS: One of the reasons that they probably came here in the first place.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:45:13] And the first they got to remember, this was a watermen community before they came.

BRENT LEWIS: Right. It's like complaining about something that's already there.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:45:26] That you knew were here when you moved here.

BRENT LEWIS: [laughs] It's like moving in the woods and complaining about deer.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:45:30] About the bear.

BRENT LEWIS: [laughs] Right.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:45:32] [laughs] Right.

BRENT LEWIS: What don't people understand about your business and your job?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:45:48] I think they don't really understand how tough it is to actually make a living off the working on the Bay as a waterman.

BRENT LEWIS: In regards to physical, the economic stress?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:45:57] And you... The weathering conditions and the actually, going out catching the seafood. And some years, you have good years, bad years. It's not like just going to a job every day getting a paycheck on Friday.

BRENT LEWIS: Right. You got a lot of [both speaking-unclear]

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:46:17] Because a lot of times, you don't catch any. Say a guy's crabbing or oystering and that day, the weather's bad so he can't go to work. So he's not going to make any money that day.

BRENT LEWIS: And you still have to maintain your boat.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:46:33] Maintain your boat and... yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: Things happen. Things will...

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:46:37] Take care of your family.

BRENT LEWIS: Right. It's always been part of the challenge of working on the water is maintaining a kind of a safety net, right? A lot of guys don't have that safety net.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:46:55] No, a lot of them don't. But when you have those real good years, you better put some away. Because you're going to have some bad ones.
[laughs]

BRENT LEWIS: Do you think that watermen have gotten better about uniting and working together to make things happen or is that still a struggle sometimes?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:47:12] No, I think they are pretty much... a lot of them work... more work together now.

BRENT LEWIS: Are you a part of the like the Watermen's Association?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:47:22] I am Watermen's Association.

BRENT LEWIS: The Queen Anne's County?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:47:25] The Queen Anne's County of Watermen and I'm a commissioner on the Oyster Advisory Board.

BRENT LEWIS: What do you do in that position?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:47:33] We just go over and look at what's best for the oyster industry.

BRENT LEWIS: How long have you been part of that, Tyrone?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:47:44] About two years.

BRENT LEWIS: Is that a... something that you volunteered to do
or were you recruited?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:47:52] I was appointed.

BRENT LEWIS: Yeah. [laughs] You were appointed. [laughter]
How many people on that advisory board?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:47:57] It's about, sheesh. It's
about... I think they have about 30 commissioners. And
that's all through like the whole state.

BRENT LEWIS: So we see a lot of watermen here on the Eastern
Shore. Do we kind of miss the fact that there are also
watermen on the other side of the Bridge or are they mostly
here on this shore?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:48:17] You got more on this Eastern
Shore than on the Western Shore because very few watermen
still let you get down to the Virginia in the lower part of
the Western Shore. But most of the watermen are mostly
here on the Eastern Shore.

BRENT LEWIS: Do you... Has it been a good career?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:48:41] Well, I get... I tell people that
I get to drive a boat every day and I go fishing in fresh
air and I work for myself. So that's one of... And it's
been up and down, but as far as that, I made a... I think I
done made a pretty good living doing it.

BRENT LEWIS: Has it allowed you to do other thing? I know in the past, you've invested in some real estate and that kind of thing. Do you still, you know, do that kind of stuff, too?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:49:09] I do. I still have quite a bit of real estate.

BRENT LEWIS: That work ethic, where do you think it comes from?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:49:18] It definitely comes from my father. Because he caught... when we started out as mates on his boat, he called us every morning, me and my brother, four o'clock in the morning. "You ain't up yet? If you sick, go to the doctor. But you going to get up out of that bed, you going to work."

BRENT LEWIS: [laughs] What have you learned about life working on the water?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:49:43] Well, it have its challenges, it's up and down. You have good years and bad years. Like I was saying, during the good years, you better put some away for the bad years.

BRENT LEWIS: Have you done that? Have you been able to do that?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:49:56] I have.

BRENT LEWIS: Do you think that that is typical, or...

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:50:02] It's not typical because a lot of the watermen... I find out the younger ones. The older ones are a little more thrifty. But a lot of young ones when they making, doing real well, they spend as fast as they make it.

BRENT LEWIS: They like to burn through it.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:50:17] So when a bad year come, they don't have anything to get them through the bad year.

BRENT LEWIS: And have you... when's the last time you saw a bad year?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:50:31] I've been... been a while. Last... I've been pretty, you know, my clientele is since I've been doing it 44 years, I've built up a great clientele. You know. But being not seen it where we had to go back 25, 30 years ago we had to leave here fishing and go to Crisfield to fish because there wasn't any fish here. That wasn't such a good year. It was probably 20-some years, 25 years ago.

BRENT LEWIS: And that's about the time that oystering took a big hit, too, right?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:51:03] And oystering took a hit, a big hit, too.

BRENT LEWIS: Disease?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:51:07] Disease. Killed a lot of the oysters. A lot of the watermen left the water and got jobs because they couldn't make a living anymore.

BRENT LEWIS: Right. Is that something that isn't as much of a concern now, the disease? Has it kind of been eradicated?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:51:23] With the rain, what they call the MS... keeps the... and the water gets too salty, it kills the oysters. So you got to have a balance of fresh water and salt water. And by the rain having a lot of rain, it's kind of keeps that disease down. So it keeps the oysters growing.

BRENT LEWIS: So that's something certainly you guys have no control over.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:51:45] That's Mother Nature. [laughs]

BRENT LEWIS: Mother Nature. So she's a big part of what you do.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:51:49] Very big part. Mother Nature, very big part.

BRENT LEWIS: Do you have to be adaptable like in regards to nature and...

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:51:58] You do and...

BRENT LEWIS: I mean, you a little less because, you know, your mar... your clientele is different. But if you're working the market, if you're fishing...

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:52:08] If you fish an oyster and like in we don't have oysters here at Kent Island. You have to go other places where the oysters are...

BRENT LEWIS: Which guys...

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:52:17] ... to make a living which they do. Yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: ... which they do. What are you most proud of in your career?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:52:27] Well, I've made a decent living working on the water. I worked for myself the last 40 years and I... you got... it's something you got to enjoy. When you get to be on the water every year, every day. And I...

BRENT LEWIS: Do you still enjoy it?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:52:46] ... I still enjoy it every day.

BRENT LEWIS: You love your work.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:52:49] I love my work.

BRENT LEWIS: I want to ask you do you still spend much time down in Kent Narrows?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:52:58] I'm there every day.

BRENT LEWIS: How has it changed? What do you see the change particularly in Kent Narrows?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:52:54] Well right now, it's like more just for the tourists. You know, you got your restaurants,

hotels. And it used to be better restaurants, better food, but now, there's just... I think they just accommodate the tourists. It's not the locals.

BRENT LEWIS: Positives and negatives?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:53:23] Yeah, it bring jobs in for the economy. It's money coming in, money coming in the economy.

BRENT LEWIS: Well, like you said, with your clientele... Are you booked way in advance? Do these... or how far in advance like are you booked for this season?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:53:38] Well, usually I got trips, some of them, the people come the same time every year. So I got people come like they book, start booking the beginning of the year for some of them may come book way into October, you know.

BRENT LEWIS: Do you work with the other head boat captains?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:53:59] We all work together.

BRENT LEWIS: So if someone were to show up and not have a place on your boat, could you help find them a spot?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:54:05] Yeah, I call one of the other captains. I got my Captain Price is my cousin, Captain Buck's my cousin. So we'll usually... we call... one of us is running a little short and if we have too many, we'll send them to each other.

BRENT LEWIS: Are the head boat captains mostly out of Kent Narrows?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:54:26] It's right here Kent Narrows, it's more head boat captains right here than anywhere I know.

BRENT LEWIS: And you guys have gotten some attention in the last few years. Mr. Barry? made a documentary about you guys. Is that helpful?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:54:43] It is. It does. Helpful. And we just made... they made a Maryland Public Television just made one on me. And it's a lot of attention and it brings more business in.

BRENT LEWIS: Do they go... did they go out on the boat with you for that documentary?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:54:49] They went on the boat with me fishing and they went on the boat with my oystering.

M: Do you think the collapse of the Key Bridge will have any affect on clientele coming here in the summertime?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:55:08] No.

M: No?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:55:10] No. No. Key Bridge is kind of out the way and, you know, most of them come, you know, they coming down Route 50 so they don't really have to use the Key Bridge.

BRENT LEWIS: Where are most of your clients from?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:55:26] All over. I take people Philly,
New Jersey, New York, DC, Baltimore...

BRENT LEWIS: Are there people who come down more than one time,
over a season?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:55:39] Some people come almost every
other week. Some of them come every week.

BRENT LEWIS: And like you said, they bring their kids, their
families.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:55:45] Their kids, their families.

BRENT LEWIS: You probably have made a lot of friends.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:55:48] Oh yeah. And a lot of... I run
into a lot of different people. I take... With Seafarers
Yacht Club, they have a camp, summer camp, for kids. And I
take them out that summer camp out every summer, too. I do
trips for Camp Pecometh and I do Wilmington Parks & Rec. I
take kids out of Baltimore on summer youth groups.

BRENT LEWIS: Are some... are those some of the trips you most
look forward to?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:56:26] Some... [laughter] Sometimes.
[laughter] I enjoy watching the kids catch fish and they
got... They catch a fish and they start smiling when they
first caught... catch their first fish.

BRENT LEWIS: Because I imagine you're introducing those kids to a life they're not at all aware of.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:56:42] Yeah. I am, yeah. Some of them never been on a boat, never seen a fishing rod, never seen a fish.

BRENT LEWIS: That's exciting for a kid.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:56:53] It is.

BRENT LEWIS: Josh, you got any questions?

M: I think I asked most of mine about... I mean, I'm... I do a lot of research on the Narrows area so you kind of covered the bars and the history and the... Well actually, was there a place that you always went in that area whether it was for bar, food, or friends?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:57:13] I used to eat at Annie's because they had the best food down there. And they tore Annie's down. So that was the best food in the Kent Narrows was Annie's restaurant. [laughs] When...

BRENT LEWIS: Well, and when we were running around, Rocky's Liquor Store was still across the street from there.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:57:28] Yeah, and Rocky's Liquor Store.

BRENT LEWIS: The shanties were still...

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:57:30] And they had... Back in the '70s, they had Carnabucci's, the Tastee Freez. They had the best fried clams around.

BRENT LEWIS: And The Jetty used to be...

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:57:44] Bent Prop, Bent Prop. Yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: ... Bent Prop. And it was an American Legion for
a while.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:57:48] It was.

BRENT LEWIS: African-American American Legion, right?

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:57:50] Yeah, it was.

M: I remember that was on our high school era. [both
speaking-unclear]

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:57:54] Mm-hmm. Then it was Portside.

BRENT LEWIS: Portside.

M: Portside.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:57:58] Black people owned it then. Mm-
hmm.

BRENT LEWIS: And of course when we were growing up, the
drinking age was 18. So...

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:58:04] Yeah. You could buy a beer at
18.

BRENT LEWIS: ... you could theoretically be in high school and
go to the bars legally.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:58:11] And buy a beer. Eighteen.

BRENT LEWIS: Yeah. And at that point, that part of Kent
Narrows where Jean Stelmach was and The Jetty is now, the

Shannings were still there, kind of had a rough reputation at the end.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:58:25] It was kind of rough.

BRENT LEWIS: There were some altercations and...

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:58:28] It was kind of fights there.

BRENT LEWIS: [laughs] Right.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:58:31] Everybody had a knife because they worked... shucked clams and oysters [laughs] in the packing houses.

BRENT LEWIS: And they weren't necessarily from here.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:58:40] No.

BRENT LEWIS: We grew up in an era that was a transitional era.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:58:44] Yeah, grew up in... When the '70s was a good, good time to grow up in.

BRENT LEWIS: Yeah, because things were changing here but we still had a lot of freedom.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:58:51] Stuff was a whole lot cheaper. I was telling people when I was going to high school, gasoline was 45 cents a gallon. You could get a pack of cigarettes... I had a cigarette machine for three quarters, 75 cent. Vending machine. [laughs]

M: Yeah. Yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: I worked at Stuffy's? the year that gas went up. And so every day, I'd have to go out and change the gas

sign but it never went over a dollar. And that was during the oil crisis.

M: Was that when the license plates... when they had odd and even license plates and they have different [both speaking-unclear]

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:59:19] Yeah. That's right. Yeah, they had lines to get gas.

BRENT LEWIS: How did something like that affect your, like, work in the water? Did you also have to every other day or how...

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:59:30] No, because you got gas, you bought it, you know, at the marinas. So you had to have that to go to work so they let you have gas, you know, every day.

BRENT LEWIS: Right. Because you were an essential...

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:59:45] Essential, yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: That would've affected the economy.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:59:48] Yeah. You had to go to work.

BRENT LEWIS: Tyrone, thank you, brother! I appreciate it.

TYRONE MEREDITH: [00:59:52] All right. You are welcome.

END OF AUDIO FILE